

Presence by **RJH-NG**

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Summary: A month after closing the gate, Eleven and Hopper must pick up the pieces. Eleven POV, second person, mileven. This is my first ever fic so...hi!

Presence

It seems like a lifetime ago that you had been fearful of asking questions. A life time it might as well have been, since you had last known staying awake endless nights in the sterile room where you slept, wondering what you were, or why you were here. Questions with no answers, for you had been told, or rather *ordered*, not to ask the why, or the how, or the what of anything.

It could not be asked why you were here, where did you come from, or who you were helping. At best you would be told that you were helping your country against the "evil Communists", who wanted to come and destroy America, take away your Lion, and hurt Papa. Country, evil, Communists, all big words for bigger concepts that escaped your understanding. The whole world back then was stainless steel grey, stark white walls, and bright, invasive lights. You had no time, and little care, for the bigger concepts the adults seemed to take for granted.

But you understood the concept of hurt, of pain, and you knew you didn't want them to take away your Lion, who had been your only companion in all the time you could remember at the lab. And so you did as they said, your mind working its magic and dredging up formless but terrifying imagery of what the "Communists" might look like. So fearful of these faceless Lion-thieves, you endured the pain that the bad men put you through.

Your whole life there was pain, either your own or that which they made you inflict on others-and should you resist, should you show even an ounce of unwillingness to comply, they'd lock you up, stick your shoulder with electrical batons, and scold you for being a "bad girl". It was fear of failure, fear of not being good enough and being forced to sit in silence for countless hours with nothing but that tiny, impenetrably dark room, and your own thoughts. You'd be let out eventually, when you were ready to be obedient again, and you'd be allowed to rejoin your Lion friend. But Lion's company was incomplete. He didn't talk, and the more you hurt, the less he seemed able to help. He was, after all, not real, and he could not help you with your increasingly complicated thoughts and feelings anymore

than you could help yourself, for you lacked the words to describe them.

There was only so much you could take, only so much any one person can handle, and so you killed. In seething rage, you threw men against walls and broke their necks, because they had hurt you and made you feel *anger*. Even if you did not know what anger was, a lifetime of torment at the hands of these men had caused you to snap and lash out, demonstrating powers you hadn't known you had until the time came when you could no longer contain them.

Then you collapsed against the wall and cried, but did not know it was *guilt* which wracked your heart, your mind, your very soul. All you knew in that moment was a boiling feeling all over your body, and then a dull, heavy weight hanging in your chest at the sight of their bloody, limp corpses, which forced the salty water to flow freely from your eyes. You were familiar with crying, intimately familiar. But you had been told crying was a weakness, which you knew to be a bad thing; something else which made you a "bad girl". "*No crying!*" The disciplinarian shouted the phrase numerous times when you just had enough and couldn't go on. Apparently you were supposed to be strong in the face of pain, because the Communists definitely were. So they hurt you until you stopped crying, and even as you stopped, you knew you weren't strong, not truly. You had merely cried yourself numb, but you couldn't let them know that or else they'd know you lied, which was *worse* than even asking questions. Worse than perhaps anything else. Lying meant you had betrayed him, and he was one you never betrayed.

You remember his face, his kind eyes, his soft, reassuring voice, and his white hair. Papa never hurt you, he always took care of you and played with you. He brought you crayons and coloring books and washed you when you were dirty. He read you stories at night and was the only one allowed in your room. Relative to the rest of the lab, Papa was safety.

But he also watched as the bad men took you into the dark room. He watched as they jabbed you with electrical batons. He watched as you lay writhing in pain from these punishments, begging for it to stop, for Papa to intervene. Instead, he watched with a quiet solemnity that told you you had *deserved* what had happened to you,

even if you didn't understand the concept of "deserve". The feeling was enough, the meaning clear, in those cold grey eyes.

For twelve years, that was your world. When you misbehaved, you anticipated the punishment of pain. You did not sleep at night after a bad day, fearful that at any moment the thud of heavy boots would signal the arrival of the disciplinarian, and you'd have to go with Papa and let the bad men throw you in the dark room. You'd watch as he watched you, ignoring your pleas. Weakness deserved punishment, that is what you had been taught, even if it had never been said. Questions deserved pain, too, and so you asked no questions.

So much had changed since then, it might as well have been a lifetime ago. But in matter of fact, it had only been a year.

Now, you're thirteen years old, and questions pour out of you, flowing freely and openly. Your world is new, and big, and scary, and wondrous all at once. It is filled with people of all shapes and sizes, of all kinds of personalities. Of friends and family, of color and cold and warmth, of a whole assortment of creatures, of big cities and small towns, of history, and of a future you never knew you could possibly have. Nice people had taken you in, cared for you, and made you feel new emotions, ones you had no words for when you felt them, but knew them to be *good*. They were feelings that you would want to feel until the end of time.

Now there were words for them, words to attach meaning too. Happiness, hope, joy, excitement, love. Happiness, the one that swells in your chest in all its immediacy. The loose and relaxed feeling of joy, which was like happiness, but one that lasted through the day and stayed with you as a quiet, pleasant companion. The electrical energy of excitement that made you restless and jumpy. And the anticipation of goodness, of the knowledge that things can get better, which is what hope brings. All were things you experienced in some form or other every day now.

Somewhere in that mixture of new and good emotions, love existed. You know you feel it, you're sure of it. Yet what it is, how to describe it, and even who it applies too and how, remained elusive. Indeed, love was the most elusive emotion for you to categorize of them all.

Love changes and molds its nature to fit the moment that contains it—sometimes an intense passion, others a more subtle desire, and everything imaginable in between. Often it was directed at the boy you *know* you love: Mike Wheeler. The feelings always change in new, but benevolent ways when you're around him, and for this reason your mind always imagines water when you imagine love.

You are also sure, however, that love is not bound by one person, or even one type, and this makes the puzzle all the more difficult.

You look up from your plate of turkey, at the fuzzy beard of the large man sitting across from you at your little table and you smile, because a piece of whipped cream is stuck in it. You point and giggle, and he teasingly says that he's saving that little bit of whipped cream for later. Making good on his word, he leaves it there until he's finished eating his Eggos, and then picks it off with a single finger and sticks it in his mouth. "Hmm," says Jim, "you know, beard hair adds to the flavor."

You laugh, feeling happy, (or joyous?) at this nice man's humor, his smile which pulls his beard up his face, and the way his eyes squint in a kind way. It was a smile that told you you could trust him, even if he could be intimidating at times. It was a smile that told you you were *here*, and that you mattered.

You remember another large man with a fuzzy beard, and an inexplicably trustworthy smile, from a long, long time ago. The first good man you ever met. You remember his kitchen, his ice cream, his hamburger, and the word he taught you. "*That smile looks good on you*," he had said, and you hear it in your head as clearly as if he was still here.

The divide between the past and the present is a blurry one for you. A word here, a phrase there, or an image here, create cracks and fissures in the barrier between then and now, until you can barely distinguish what you had seen with what you are seeing. For you, you carry the past around you as a constant shadow of your present, wearing it like a straight jacket, one you twist and turn and struggle every night to be free of, but can never seem to escape. Only during the day, with others around, do you get any kind of peace, but there's always one toe over the line, some part of you that's not always quite

here, but is always *there*.

So often the past drags you back to the old rules, of bad questions, punishment, guilt, anger, and you feel the tears forming in your eyes, threatening to spill forth and reveal your weakness all over again.

Benny Hammond, the other man with a beard...he was gone now. Killed by the bed men who had hurt you all your life, and had chased you into this town you now call home. The mental recording of the soft discharge of a silenced gun signalling the moment Benny's limp body collapsed to the floor with a sickening thud replays on a loop in your mind. The electrical shock of sheer panic, and the penetrating stare of the bad woman who murdered him finding you hiding in the back kitchen. It was a dream you had often, and every time you realized what was happening in the dream, you were too slow to save him.

The sound of the gun echoes repeatedly in your head, as loudly as an echo in a cramped cave. He hadn't deserved what happened to him. You feel the pangs of a familiar guilt forming in your chest, and a voice, your own voice, saying through sobs *I'm the monster*-before you force yourself to remember something else. You squint your eyes, concentrating with what will you can muster on a different memory.

The faded barrier gives way now to that new memory, one that battles the image of Benny Hammond falling limply to the ground for supremacy in your mind. Light had shone through the curtains of your cabin, the pleasant aroma of sizzling ham filled the air, and through the cracks in the worn wood, you could hear birds singing their little songs. It was mid-July, 1984, and the two of you were bonding over your mutual love of grilled pork, talking about your favorite person in the world (Mike), when Jim spoke up and told you "*well, you deserve to be happy*".

You detected the goodwill in the phrase, but what did "deserve" mean? "*It means...ah,*" Jim had scratched his nose and scrunched his face, as he is prone to do when he's thinking hard. "*Well it means you have the right to be happy. You deserve to be happy probably more than most.*"

"*Why?*" you had asked.

Jim had shifted in his chair and looked at you, with that steely gaze of his. *"Because what those bastards did to you has earned them their place in hell. Nobody deserves the shit they put you through, kid. Nobody."*

You had looked at the floor, thinking about the first good man even then. *"Benny Hammond didn't deserve that."*

Jim had taken a deep breath, and let it out slowly. You knew Benny had been Jim's friend, and your mind in the present, which cast shadows onto the memory, creates a false image, one of Jim, not Benny, falling to the ground. Then the false image shifts to a dream, no, a *nightmare* you've had more than once.

You're heading outside with Mike and his friends. The bad men are coming, that's what Lucas kept saying. You step outside, except this time the bad men are right on top of you. They get you, grabbing you around the middle. Lucas had already been caught, he's gagged, eyes hazy and defeated, in one of the vans. As they drag you into another van, Mike and Dustin are taken away from you, headed in a different direction. You beg and plead and scream, and you hear Mike's muffled voice scream your name, but to avail; you never see him again.

You squint your eyes in the present, straining your willpower for the memory to play out the *right* way, to not let the nightmare win. Jim is alive. Dustin, Will, Lucas, Mike they are *alive*.

"No kid, no he didn't deserve that. But neither did you. It wasn't your fault."

You had been raised with the understanding that everything is your fault, and being at fault *deserved* punishment. In the lab, it could not be anyone else's fault, because you were the only one causing anything to happen.

The deaths of those men in the lab, the blood smeared on the laboratory walls. The disappearance of Will, trapped in the upside down, shivering and starving. The deaths of Benny Hammond-falling to the ground with a heavy thud-and Barbara Holland-her mangled, disemboweled, and rotted corpse burned as an imprint in your memories. The list goes on and on until your mind spun and reeled

from your own self hatred. A feeling that you are intimately familiar with, yet always erodes at your strength like acid, burning away the good memories that struggle so desperately to have themselves be heard. You felt pressure behind your eyes brought on by that dull ache in your chest, and you had let out a small sob, in spite of yourself.

Jim had stood at once to come to your side. He had knelt so that his face was level with yours, which was now streaming with tears. You covered your eyes with your hands and held yourself tightly at his approach, knees tucked up to your chest, recoiling into the wall. This was pure instinct overriding sense, some part of you deep within still terrified of letting anyone see you crying.

But Jim did not hit you, did not throw you into dark rooms, or prod you with electrified batons.

Instead you felt his large arms wrap themselves around your shoulders, his hands at your back as he pulled you into a warm embrace, your cheek brushing against his fuzzy beard. *"It's okay kid,"* he had said, his voice at your ear as a new torrent of tears fell onto his his shoulder. *"They can't hurt you anymore. You're safe, and you're loved."*

It had been an almost automatic statement on Jim's part, one that came naturally in your time of need. That had been the first time you had heard the word love. *"A very powerful like"* was what Jim had later described it as. It was one of many words of the day you added to your mental collection, but this one was different. It clung to the back of your mind, refusing to let go, like an incomplete puzzle or a half-eaten ego. It was a word that Jim hadn't used very often since, so you knew its power, something not to be taken lightly. Yet somehow it was a familiar word, even if you couldn't place how or why.

You wondered where the line between "like" and "love" was.

When you asked some time later, Jim had simply raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and said *"Kid, that is one of life's great mysteries. And some folks never figure it out."*

Then you hear his voice again, this time more concretely than the echoes of your mind. "El, you okay?" You look up, blink, and see him staring at you. "You dozed off a bit there, looked stressed out."

"I'm awake," you say, but do not deny the stress.

He lets out a half hearted chuckle, finishing the piece of turkey that was on his fork. He never takes his gaze off you, as if you might collapse at any moment into a puddle. "Not what I meant. What're you thinking about?"

You shrug, unsure of how to respond. You have gotten so much better at communicating since Jim had taken you in a year ago, but there are still so many thoughts, ever more complicated, that elude your ability to describe. "Remembering," you eventually say. "Remembering our talk. About 'deserve' and 'love'."

Jim nods, setting his fork down. He says nothing, seeing on your face that you want to say more, but are struggling with how. He knows that sometimes the best way to learn is to learn on your own, to allow yourself to figure yourself out, rather than have him inject his well intentioned but perhaps inaccurate opinion. You're already confused enough as it is, after all. "I guess I'm getting better," you eventually say. "I still...remember things I don't want to remember."

Jim nods, understanding quickly as he always did. "You're thinking about Benny again?"

"Yes. And everyone else." There's a new name that you must carry with you. Bob Newby, and you suppose that may have been what's been troubling you over this past month, the way guilt sometimes manifests in vague, indirect ways. Mrs. Byers' boyfriend, and by all accounts the nicest, most giving person of all time. You had never met him, hadn't even seen a picture, but Mike had described him as always smiling, kind of fat, and selfless to a fault. Your mind constructs an image of "Santa Claus", red hat and all, whenever you think of Bob. Bob Newby, another name to add to the list of those whose lives were cut far too short, all because you had opened that damned gate.

"Sometimes I just feel like I'm...like I'm some kind of black hole or

something." Something that sucks everything towards it and destroys it. You had told Kallie you could save your friends, and you had, but correcting a mistake you had caused in the first place felt like a zero sum game. A part of you, even now sitting at this table, was still back there with Kallie, in the big city, and part of you was still stuck in the lab. You feel stretched, in too many places and times at once, often unsure of how to fit the pieces back together, so that you could just exist in the *here* and *now*.

You look down at your half finished eggos, your appetite whisked away along with the good feelings. In their place, you feel heavy, and extremely tired, yet you know you'd be unable to sleep if you went to bed early. *It never ends*, you think to yourself. "I try to remember what you said, about deserve, and love, and all that stuff. But the bad stuff just comes back. Every time."

It was here that Hopper leans in importantly, and mentions a name you were not expecting to hear: Sarah. It was a name you had only heard once before, a word more powerful than perhaps even love, at least for Jim. She was gone, you know that, but you didn't know how, until Jim told you everything.

The cancer had eaten at her lungs until she could not breath without a respirator. Jim had stayed strong and put on the mask of a good natured, happy father every time he saw her in the hospital bed, hoping beyond hope that he could make her pain just a little more bearable. He read her stories, cracked jokes, brought her toys for her to play with in the hospital, and even drove a couple of her friends up to see her on occasions.

But every smile became harder to maintain than the previous, as Sarah's hair vanished, her skin became sallow, and heavy bags formed under her eyes. She lost so much weight towards the end that she looked like she was already gone. Eventually her friends had to stop seeing her, as Sarah became weaker and weaker, on account of her damaged immune system. It was just as well, for Jim didn't want to stress Sarah out, for she had become self conscious of her condition. Soon enough it was just himself, his then-wife, and Sarah battling through the cancer together, and it was taking a visible toll on the poor girl. "My daughter," Jim spoke in a very deliberate tone of voice, "was tired. No child deserves to be that tired."

The tears that had been threatening to fall from your eyes finally do, but you do not sob. They are not tears of mere distress, but something far worse. They fall in silence, and you listen with such rapt attention to Jim's story that you do not notice them roll down your cheek and off your chin, onto the table.

He continues, saying that in the days and months and years following Sarah's passing, he would remember her. The bad memories of Sarah in the hospital haunted him by day, while the good memories of her when she was alive haunted him at night, only for him to wake every time to the crushing truth that it was all just a dream. Eventually the dream world and the real world blurred together, and in truly desperate moments, he'd be convinced he could see her, and hear her, if only for an instant. Eventually it became too much—there was too much memory between the two of them, and so Jim and his wife separated. She went on to remarry, and had a new kid. Meanwhile Jim was left alone.

You see his eyes too are now glistening wet, but he wipes them away hurriedly, as if ashamed. Some distant part of you feels as though whatever point Jim may have been trying to make was lost among this sudden outpouring. You realize he needs you perhaps as much as you need him. You reach a hand over and grab his much larger one. "I am sorry," you say with sincerity.

Jim looks at you blurrily, reading the regret in your eyes. "What are you sorry for?"

"That Sarah can not be here," you say, but the statement feels incomplete, missing some deeper truth hidden somewhere in your subconscious. Jim studies you, in that way he does, that *detective stare* as you call it. He's piecing the puzzle together like all good cops do and knows, perhaps even before you fully understand it yourself, what you're thinking. That unsaid regret swirling in your mind, a feeling more than a phrase, a feeling of not being good enough and never being able to replace Jim's daughter, his *real* daughter that he clearly was still mourning in his own way. How foolish you must have been to think you could live up to *Sarah*, after all of the horrible things you had done and caused? In your mind you picture Sarah as everything you are not: someone who had never run away, never lashed out, never tried to hurt Jim, had never hurt or killed others,

and had been Jim's little girl. Someone innocent, who had been the victim of unfair circumstance, taken far too early by the insatiable black hole that seemed to plague those who deserve it the least.

And yet you find a kind of kinship with this girl you had never met, a shared victimization, by sheer cruel circumstance of fate, that had lead both of your lives astray, and the lives of those around you. How different would Jim's life be if Sarah had lived? Would you be sitting here right now, sharing eggos and TV dinners? How different would *your* life be, and the lives of your friends, if you had never opened that gate and unleashed its horrors? Would you even know them? Would Will have moments where his eyes go blank and he stares into nothing, reliving some terrible memory in the Upside Down? Would Mike be wracked with anxiety over you, would Nancy have had to bury her best friend, would Joyce have lost Bob?

So much pain had been caused because you were weak, easily lead by the bad men who had hurt you and made you believe all of those things about evil Communists. Why had you not just used your powers to escape before all of these awful things could have happened, the way Kallie had escaped? *Because you were scared.* You feel the thought eating at your mind. *Scared of what might be outside the building, scared of what they'd do to you if they caught you.*

You struggle in so many ways to imagine what Sarah must have been like, of how you can reconcile being alive despite all that had happened, while Sarah, and so many others who deserved it far less, were gone. Just another incomplete, incomprehensible puzzle you seemed to be missing the pieces to.

That struggle must have been painted on your sullen face and the tears drying on your cheeks, as Jim puts the final piece of the puzzle together on his own. "You have nothing to be sorry for," he says, maneuvering his hand so that he is now holding yours. Your small hand disappears inside his, and he gives it a firm but gentle squeeze, like a tiny embrace, which carries as much power as any words he could have said. *You have nothing to be sorry for* rings in your ears. "It took a long time. Sarah...she's gone, but the time I spent with her? I value that. And I value you."

"I'm...not," you say, the regret in your mind finally forming into a

cohesive, clear statement. "I'm not Sarah."

"You don't have to be," says Jim. "You just need to be you."

You look up at him. He's smiling again, a truly sincere smile, one without his customary humor or irony, just a genuine smile full of warmth. It was the kind of smile you had rarely, if ever, seen Jim wear, and it was equal parts strange and comforting. "Why me?" you say.

"Because there's no one like you," says Jim. You stare, not catching his meaning. "You've done more for this town than I ever have. I'm pretty good at taking care of nesting owls, even busting a delinquent or two. But all this paranormal shit wasn't covered in my police training."

"This...paranormal *shit* was caused by me," you say.

"No, El, it wasn't. It was caused by those bastards from the lab. They used you, but that's what guys like them do. Use people, rough them up until they're nice and obedient, and then they don't give a damn about what happens to them when they're done. That doesn't make it your fault. It makes it theirs. You had no choice."

"I could have run. I could have fought back. Kallie did."

"You're not Kallie, which is good because she sounds like a piece of work," says Jim. "It's easy to realize what you could have done now. Everything's easier in hindsight."

"I was scared," you say, mentally going back to all of the times you *just* barely scraped away with your life. "So many times, I put my friends in danger. I...did my best to try and protect them, but-"

"No buts. There's no buts here, you *did* protect them. You protected this whole damn town. You've given much more than you ever should have needed to for this town, and those kids." You shake your head, unconvinced, your current state of mind not letting the praise break through. But you also know you won't convince him either. "Only thing you can do, or any of us really, is put one foot in front of another. Keep going, even if it feels like you want to give up."

"I did give up," you say. "I saw the bad men with Mike, and I gave up."

"But you didn't," said Jim. "Giving up's a lot worse than surviving in the woods for a month. That sounds like you were still going to me."

"I...survived," you say, and search around for the right words. "I...I didn't...I don't know what the word is. I...definitely didn't *live*." Somehow that sounded right, or more right than anything else, even if you knew it made no logical sense.

It must have made some sense to Jim, though. "No, surviving isn't the same as living." He paused, taking that in for a moment and clearly mulling his words. "But surviving is a lot of hard work, and its work towards something. You did what you had to do...for what?" You stare at him, and he stares at you. The silence is the only answer you can muster, because all you feel in that moment is uncertainty. "No one survives," he continues, "unless they have something to *live* for."

"I don't know why I did it," you finally say. "I just...kept thinking about those dead men. People I killed, or saw killed. I didn't...*don't* know what that's like. I don't want to find out."

Jim nods his head in a contemplative sort of way, scratching his nose in thought. "Yes that's...well, something. I know that one too, actually. Been there myself. After...after Diane left, I sort of shut down, you know? Just went through the motions. 'Survived', I guess you'd call it. Dunno why I did, wasn't much left in my life after that, to be honest." Jim's face is contorted in a half frown, deep in thought, when suddenly it loosens up and he says "it worked out in the end though."

"How?"

"Found you in the woods didn't I?"

You're confused for a moment, unsure if he was still talking about his life and, if he was, what you had to do with it. "Do you mean, it worked out for me in the end?"

"For both of us," said Jim. "I found you, and even if we get on each

others' nerves sometimes, I'd say it's been pretty good. Better than roughing it in the woods, at least." Jim leans forward and folds his hands together, thinking hard. "I mean, you've done loads for this town. And, well, damn it kid you've done loads for *me* too."

You frown, and ask "what did I do?"

Jim sighs and scratches his head. "It's...complicated," he says. "But...it's been nice, to have company, you know? And you've put up with my bullshit for a year now, which I know isn't easy."

You can't help but smile at that. "You got that right," you mumble, loud enough for him to hear you.

Jim looked comically offended, sitting back in his chair and clutching his chest as if reeling. "Hey now, just because I admit it doesn't mean you have to agree." You smile even wider. You begin to see Jim's point, even if neither of you could explain it well. Whatever horrible, awful things had happened in the past, he was right. There was some good in there too, and you were experiencing some of that good now.

"Thank you," you finally say. "I just...wish it was easier."

"It will be, kid." Jim's expression has returned to its natural state, but there's a gleam of hope in his eyes. "It may never go away, but it does get easier. And you've got some good people now who can help. All you gotta do is be who you are. And who you are is the girl who saved all our asses, twice. So I think you've earned a special treat."

You perk up slightly, curious what this treat could be. Staying up extra late watching your "soaps" (which you assumed were called that because everyone was immaculately clean)? New, bigger screen TV? New eggo recipe? While you ponder the possibilities, Jim stands, and tells you to wait right there. He walks out the front door, presumably to his car, leaving you more confused than ever. He returns a couple of minutes later with a box roughly the size of his chest. It is a simple cardboard box, unwrapped, and Mike had told you Christmas presents always had to be wrapped, so you don't think that's it.

Jim sets the box on the table, and he looks...nervous? Why would he be nervous? Imagination running wild, you picture feral rats leaping

out to attack for some reason. You reach out a tentative hand to the box and pull it towards you. "What is it?" You ask, unable to rid your mind of rats.

"Well it's a, uh, just open it, you'll see."

You take your dinner knife and slice through the packing tape. The box lid flings open and you wince, but thankfully there's nothing feral inside it. After tossing the packing paper in a pile with the packing slip, you reach inside and pull out a fine, silky fabric. You stand, and hold it in front of you to get a better look, and you see that it's a dress. Not like the dress you had once worn a year ago, with its bright pink, thick cloth and white collar. This was thin, cool to the touch, and silvery. A red belt went across the middle of it, with a buckle to hold the dress securely to your midriff.

"I wasn't sure," said Jim, scratching his beard, "wasn't sure what'd you like. And it was pretty last minute, but I got the best one, I hope, that I could find." You hold it up to the light, eyes widening in disbelief.

"It's beautiful," you say breathlessly. You hold it close to your chest, feeling it's cool silky fabric against your bare arms. "Thank you." You set the dress on the table, stand, and throw your arms around Jim's center. So sudden is the embrace that Jim has to take a step back to steady himself, but soon his large arms are around you, a hand at your head rustling your hair, and you feel warm and safe and grateful for all this man has done. Then a thought occurs to you. "Last minute," you say. "What's 'last minute'? What is the dress for?"

"That, El, is the real surprise." Then, Jim reaches into his pocket, and in his hand is a thin piece of blue paper covered with little white snowflakes that says "ADMIT ONE" in black bold lettering across the center. "Mike told me he made you a promise," your heart swells and you suck in a deep, anticipating breath, "to go the Snowball?" He hands you the ticket. "Still wanna go?"

You let an involuntary squeal of delight and hop in place, bursting with renewed energy and shear, unfettered excitement. Snatching the ticket from Jim's hand, you hold it outstretched in front of you, beaming at this tiny miracle, a literal dream come true.

A year ago, you had been wandering aimlessly in the woods, at night dreaming of the Snowball Mike had promised he'd take you too. You had no idea what it'd look like, but you imagined there would be pure white snow drifting lazily from the ceiling, somehow, with music that had no real lyrics or rhythm (for you had never really heard music at the time) but made you feel what you supposed good music was supposed to feel like. And "dancing", whatever that was. You imagined Mike holding you close and planting his lips on yours again (something you now knew to be called a "kiss"). You imagined all of his friends were there, too, and that you would all be together. You didn't know what friends really did when not fighting interdimensional monsters, nor did you know what they did at the Snowball, though in the dream it never mattered. But now, finally, you'd get to find out. Now suddenly it was all real.

This time you really do almost knock Jim over from your hug, and he has to hold his hand out to the wall to keep from falling over. "Thank you thank you thank you," you repeat a half dozen times. Vaguely you're aware of wetness at your cheeks, that your breaths are coming in short bursts, and that the last "thank you" comes out as a choked sob. "Why," you gasp, "why am I crying?" You imagine the living paradox you must be, to have such a shameless grin stretching across your red, tear stained face.

Jim gets down on both of his knees so that he's level with you once more. His hands are reassuringly on your shoulders, and he couldn't look any happier if he tried. "Sometimes crying can mean good things are happening. And don't thank me, thank the Wheeler kid. He's the one who bought the ticket."

Impossibly you feel even more elated. After all this time, Mike had kept his promise! You give Jim another hug (it's almost habitual at this point) to which he says with a laugh "save your hugs for Mike."

"I won't run out," you say into his shoulder.

"Ah maybe, but you have to get ready. The dance starts in about an hour."

Your eyes widen and you pull back from Jim. Without saying a word you rush to pick up the dress and take it to your room to put it on.

You're halfway through stripping off your day clothes before you realize you don't actually know *how* to put it on.

"Put it on like a shirt, put your arms through the arm holes, and there's a zipper in the back I'll help you with," says Jim through the door. You do as he says, and notice that the dress feels extremely cool and smooth on your skin. When you finish, you open the door for him to come in. Jim steps into your room carrying a sleek wooden box which he sets on your bed. He helps you with your zipper, and gestures for you to sit in the chair across from him.

"This is called a makeup kit," he says. When he flips the lock on the box open, the lid opens slowly on its own accord, and two trays unfold revealing menagerie of makeup supplies. You see various brushes and all of the magnificent colors arrayed in rows, forming a gradient from dark purple to a more natural flesh color. You'd seen women wear makeup before, and even though you'd never cared for it yourself, the prospect of showing up to the dance and seeing Mike give you that *look* again, was too enticing to pass on.

"I...don't know where to start," you say, staring at the assortment of colors with a dumbfounded expression.

Jim chuckles and says "don't worry kid. I do. Just sit up straight...just like that, and hold still."

He gets to work, starting by gently rubbing some kind of cream on your face, forehead, and cheeks that comes from a tube. His hands are a little rough, the calloused hands of a working man. You're reminded of being in a similar situation a year ago, with Mike inelegantly dabbing makeup on your face. It had been confusing and a little inconsistent at times-too much here, not enough there-but Jim worked as if he had done this before.

You ask him what he's doing every time he adds something new. Primer, concealer, powder, etc. These one word answers don't really explain what he's doing, though, and you start to feel a flutter of nerves momentarily wedge their way past the soaring happiness you're feeling. But Jim's concentration is abundantly clear, and you know in your gut he wouldn't send you out on such a big night looking like you had just spent a month in the woods.

When he finishes your "lip gloss", you ask how he knows how to do this-and somehow you know the answer before he responds.

"Sarah." He stands and steps behind you to comb your hair. "She was always into feeling like a princess, so she made sure that I knew how to make her look like one." You feel some puffs of an aerosol spray strike your head, followed by the pull of Jim's comb. Your head yanks back painfully on the first pull, and Jim mutters something about your hair being too curly. It gets easier with each pull though, and soon enough you found the experience almost relaxing. "She'd tell me all kinds of stories while I did her makeup. Mostly about stuff from her space books. She had a way of doing that, making stars and galaxies seem like stories. Couldn't have told you if she was gonna be a writer or astronaut." Jim does something to the left side of your head with his hands, and you feel something small still there when he's done. "She was a hell of a lot smarter than I am, tell you that."

"She sounds amazing," you say, unsure what else to say.

"Hm. Yeah kid, she was something else." Jim steps around to face you and inspect his handiwork. "Haven't done this in a long time," he says. Then he smiles. "But I think I still have a knack for it. Come here."

He motions for you to stand, and leads you over to the full body mirror in your room. You audibly gasp, taking in the girl staring back at you in the glass plane. You hardly recognize her, the combed back hair, a piece of which curled down from the front, like the "Superman" character from Mike's comic books. You don't recognize the flawless skin or eyes framed in dark eyeshadow, the glistening lips, or the beautiful blue-grey dress.

But as you tilt your head to one side, eyes noticeably wide with shock, you cannot deny that it's you. "What do you think?" says Jim. "Pretty bitchin' huh?"

You shake your head. Your mind is carried backwards through time to when you last felt *normal*, if you ever could truly feel normal, and the word Mike had used when you walked out of his room wearing that pink dress and blonde wig, and gave you that *look* that made you feel strange and fuzzy. "No," you say. "Pretty."

But this was different than that pink dress and blonde wig. That dress wasn't yours, and that wig wasn't your hair. They were cover ups, done to conceal who you truly were from the bad men. It was a pretty dress, it was a pretty look, but so much had changed, and you look back on that past you as alien, someone you no longer recognize. The wrong hair color, the wrong length, the wrong material for the dress and certainly the wrong color.

"You don't need it".

Looking back on it, you didn't much like that dress at all. This dress, though, was yours, and that hair was your hair. For your whole life you had never had hair or even clothes of your own. Now you could look in the mirror, take in the totality of the dress, the hair, the hair pin, the makeup, and say, with absolute certainty, that this was no one else, that *this* was you, and *you* were pretty.

You blink, still taking it all in, this gift from Jim-surely this was the ultimate Christmas gift, and surely they don't need to always be wrapped up? You'd have to ask Mike about it when you saw him tonight (and the thought of seeing Mike tonight, *tonight*, sends another wave of happiness crashing over you). "Thank you, Jim." You say. "For everything." Jim throws his right arm around your shoulder and pulls you close in one of his one armed hugs that he was fond of.

"Any time kiddo. There's just one more thing you need to complete the look."

You turn your head away from the mirror to look up at him. He steps away, sits on the bed, and rolls up his sleeve to reveal a blue wristband you had never seen him without. You had never really questioned what it is; it's as much a part of him as his beard or his cowboy hat, even if the colors didn't match. But now, as Jim stares transfixed at the blue band, eyes set in a curious kind of way, and twists it around his wrist with his other hand, you can't help but wonder what it really is.

Jim pulls the band up past his fingers and takes it off. "Hold out your arm," he says. You do so, and he slips it on over your fingers, down to your wrist. It's a little loose, but won't come off your wrist unless you want it too. You look up at Jim, and ask what it is, and why he

always wears it.

Jim had never been good at this sort of thing, expressing his most complicated feelings in a coherent way. The uncomfortable shifting, his distracted adjusting of his shirt, or the way he looks down at his wringing hands as if determined to catalogue every crease, every pour. These were all strange, but quick behaviors you had known him to display whenever he was struggling to say what he needed to say. His nervous silence lasted longer this time, though, and his mouth just barely opened and closed, as if the words were refusing to come out. Finally he wrangled them together and said "it was Sarah's. Something she...she made for me. It was a good luck charm, sorta thing. I want you to have it, you know, for the Snowball. So everything goes well."

You glance at the wristband, and back to Jim. He's looking at you with an uncharacteristic nervousness-even shyness? Or shame? He isn't quite meeting your eye. You still don't have quite the skill he has to know what all these signs mean, though hopefully, through simple exposure, one day you'll be able to read him as well as he can read you. For now, all you feel is the distinct weight of the little blue band resting on your arm.

The wristband had been his daughter's gift to him, something he carried with him everywhere he went. It was obviously significant to him, and in your heart you feel a swelling gratitude for the man who had cared for you over this past year. You close your hand into a fist, testing the wrist band's grip. It slides a little, but doesn't fall off, staying stubbornly attached, as determined as you are to see the night out. You'd heard of good luck charms from watching TV, but had never had one in real life. For a moment you wonder how something became a good luck charm, and how it worked, before realizing you don't care. If this would help make tonight go smoothly, you were that much more grateful.

Jim is still looking increasingly anxious, so you throw one last hug around him and say "thank you" for probably the millionth time tonight. You feel the tension ease out of his shoulders, and he pats your back, saying "you're welcome, El". When you break apart, you're staring at the wristband again, imagining some blond-haired girl who looked something like you, but not quite like you, handing the

wristband to Jim for the first time. *It's a good luck charm, daddy*, says a featureless female voice.

There is a fleeting moment where you wonder why Sarah looks somewhat like you in your mind, but your excitement at the approaching Snowball drowns out any time for introspection. Instead, Jim stands, and says "well we're already almost an hour late, so we better hustle."

Your eyes and head shoot to the clock, which, sure enough, reads seven-four-nine. Forty-nine minutes since the dance actually started! "Oh no!" you exclaim aloud.

"No worries, kid, these kind of things go on for hours. You'll see him. Besides, the longer you wait, the more dramatic your entrance." You don't particularly care about how "dramatic" your entrance will be. You just want to see Mike.

You hurry past Jim to grab your coat-and almost grab your winter hat before Jim reminds you how hard he had worked on your hair. "But it's breezy!" you say.

"No amount of wind will mess that hair up more than a hat," he says, throwing his coat over his shoulders. "Now come on, if we hurry we won't have to worry about the wind."

Jim throws you a flashlight and lights his, so as to better see in the dense night time woods. The two of you race out the door (you're running with one hand cupped over your hair as a protective shield) and through the forest, taking care to jump the trip wire, and make it to Jim's truck in no time at all. But the biting December air makes you wish you had been wearing pants under that dress.

When you open the door to his truck and slide onto the seat, you see yet another, smaller cardboard box on the driver's seat next to yours. Jim is framed in the open door on the other side of the truck and shines a light upon it. "Oh yeah, almost forgot," he says. "*That's* the last part of your outfit. Didn't want you wearing them while walking through the woods."

You take the box, and open it to find a pair of fancy looking black

shoes-that couldn't possibly be made for people because it only had room for one large, pointy toe. "You just slip your foot through the ring, which is kinda like a shoe lace to hold it on, with no socks," says Jim, getting into the car. "You can keep your sneakers on the floor there." He turns the key and triggers the ignition.

"Where's the rest of my toes go?" you ask, in genuine confusion.

To your surprise Jim actually laughs. "Don't worry kid your toes will fit, just might be a little tight." Jim puts the car in drive and the two of you are headed off down the road.

You do as he said, and ram your foot into the shoes with mild difficulty. They don't hurt quite as much as you thought they would, and they have more a little room than they look like they should have, but you also just *know* that they'll be uncomfortable to walk around in. Your toes are really close and some of them are laying on top of each other. And you're supposed to *dance* in these? "Why do people wear these?" you ask, trying to make your toes wiggle and separate them, to little success.

Jim shrugs, not taking his eye off the road. "Looks fancy I guess. Never understood them myself, but then again I don't wear them. It's just for fancy dress up occasions, you don't have to wear them anywhere else."

You aren't much taken with the idea of wearing them at all, but you figure this was another one of those things you wouldn't understand about life in the real world. "I tried to find some that had a flatter end," Jim continues, "give you more toe room. But that was all they had." Jim turns the wheel to take the truck onto the main road towards town.

"Why don't they all just make them like that?"

Jim shrugs again. "Lots of things I don't understand. Most women don't understand it either. I remember Joyce showed up to High School prom wearing men's dress shoes because 'they were the only ones that felt like they were meant for people and not elves.'"

You let out a loud, involuntary laugh, which also made Jim laugh,

and the smile it put on his face would linger there for several minutes. "I didn't know you went to prom with Mrs. Byers."

"Eh, I didn't. I was just there, causing all kinds of trouble in the back with some pals. She was with Lonnie at the time."

"You? Causing trouble?" you say, with a sly grin.

"I know, imagine that? Guess I became a cop to make up for it all. Yeah I was just with a couple of buddies, sneaking too many cups of punch, sitting out back smoking, trying to find a girl to dance with."

"Did you ever dance with Mrs. Byers?"

Jim's head turns very subtly towards you, clearly not expecting the question. "Nah kid, like I said, she was with Lonnie. You only dance with the people you like."

"Why didn't you like Mrs. Byers?"

A low, awkward chuckle escapes from Jim before he says "nah, it's not like that. Someone you like, more than just friends. I mean, yeah sure I liked her, but she had Lonnie, you know? And I was too busy talking all smooth to Chrissy Carpenter, so..." You detect a tinge of...something in his voice, and it is a moment before you recognize it as something you're familiar with yourself: regret.

"You mean you only dance with people that you love?"

Jim nods slowly. "Yep, in a perfect world, that's the idea." He says this very casually, in the casual way that tells you he's not being so casual. You remember the quick way he had said "yeah, the black hole, it got her." It was a tone he might've used to describe the disappointment of a favorite sports team losing, but it carried so much more that he wasn't expressing or telling you. In this case, something to do with how he really felt about Mrs. Byers-and *that* revelatory notion excited the same part of you that got butterflies while watching two people you liked get together on one of your shows. Of course he'd never admit it, even to himself, much less you. You know well by now that Jim was not the kind of person to be very open with how he feels, and you also know that you're the opposite.

No wonder you had fought so much, and so hard. You were so alike in many ways, but at the same time polar opposites in others. You imagined what it must be like, to have lost someone you loved, only to find someone to take care of all over again. In truth, you hardly had to imagine it. For a year you had lost Mike and all of your friends, and you had shared in the grief that the others felt in their own losses through simple proximity. You know you would never want to let anything bad happen to your friends, to Mike, ever again, and that if it came too it, you'd die to protect them. Likewise, Jim would never want something to happen to you, the same way it happened to Sarah. The fights you had...were bad, horrible even, but now you recognize where the anger came from. Not just from Jim, but from both of you.

You look down at the wristband, and for the briefest of moments, you see the puzzle clearly in your mind. This impossibly perfect puzzle, one that was at once frightening in its gravity but also too good to ever *actually* be true. Fully formed with all the pieces together, you feel a growing elation at this dawning realization, as to why Jim gave you-"We're here," says Jim suddenly.

You look up, and see the Hawkins Middle School coming nearer and nearer. The completed puzzle, in one moment clear as day, fades in the next moment, driven from your mind until you can barely recall this briefest burst of emotion and revelation. It is replaced by new feelings. Anxious, urgent feelings that make your stomach tie up in knots, your heart race and your spine tingle. Where you both wanted to jump out of the still moving car, race into the school, and leap into Mike's arms like in the movies...and somehow, impossibly, you fear doing *exactly* that.

This isn't the normal kind of fear you faced in public, the fear of being seen, of being caught and being taken away by the bad men. Those days were over.

It was a new fear, one that was born in the very same part of your heart that ached for so long for this day to come. The fear of it being *real*, and how could what was real ever live up to the dreams? Those perfect dreams, the ones you dreamt while sleeping in the frigid cold of Winter, 1983, with nothing to insulate you, and nothing to comfort you but the warm feelings that came with the imagined giant

snowflakes, the sensation of Mike's hands at your back, his lips on your lips, the smile on those lips, and the burning...*something* you had for him.

You fear now not being good enough, in a different way from before. You worry about your dress, your hair, and whether they had become wrinkled and tousled in the icy December wind, anything that might shatter that perfect image you had long ago constructed for this night. Worst of all, worse than it being real, you fear waking up. You fear finding yourself back in the cold woods of 1983, and being forced to experience the crushing realization that this had been the most nightmarish dream you ever had, nightmarish if only for it being impossibly perfect, and not being *real*.

As Jim pulls the car into the school parking lot, stops directly adjacent from the entrance-which is aglow with light-and puts it into park, your heart begins to race out of control, and your breaths are quickened. Out of the corner of your eye, you see Jim turn his head. "Hey, hey what's the matter?" Your chest rises and falls at a rapid pace, a strain develops in your neck as your muscles tighten, and the air caught in your throat causes you to lose your words. "El, come here it's okay."

Jim wraps his right arm around your shoulder and draws you close, over the arm rest so that you're in a somewhat awkward, but caring, one armed hug. This...contact, this *presence*, is soothing. To know, in no uncertain terms, that Jim is here right now and this part, at least this part, is not a dream.

Jim was here. He was not yelling. You were not in the cabin, curled up into a ball in your room, and he was not screaming at you to grow up. That horrible event is in the past, in the *past*, and in front of you-the real *here and now* you-no more than fifty feet away, was an entrance which seemed to you golden for its light, the entrance to the Snowball.

You refuse to cry, though the effort is herculean. You monitor your breaths, and force yourself to steady them. Your heart, however, you can do very little about, because you are still nervous, but you recognize the difference between nerves and panic. *This is real*, you tell yourself over and over. *This is real. This is real.*

"This is real, kid." You detach yourself from Jim's arm, and look at him. "You've been looking forward to this for a long time. I know you're nervous-we all get nervous at our first dance, it's perfectly normal. But all you gotta do is get out of the car, put one foot in front of the other, try not to trip in those shoes, and walk through those doors."

You look back at the doors, and feel the faint shadow of anxiety pass by you like a breeze. "Can...can you go with me, to the door?"

Jim nods in a slow, understanding sort of way. "Yeah, yeah sure kid."

You step out of the car, back into the cold air, and take some relief in the fact that it's no longer was windy. The air is completely still with anticipation, and you wonder imaginatively if you're the one doing it, an unintended byproduct of your nerves. You check your nose, and find there is no blood, but the idea you can control the weather is somehow appealing to you all the same, and you decide to try it one day in the future.

With such a prospect as controlling the weather on your mind to distract you, you walk alongside Jim with a repaired confidence. At first the pointed shoes are exactly as bad on your feet as you expected them to be, but you try to favor your heels to keep the pressure off your toes. That seems to work.

When you reach the door, you hear the steady beat of music playing inside the building. Faintly, you hear the lyrics "*If you're lost and can look and you will find me. Time After time...*". You and Jim turn to face each other. "Well kid, this is where I get off," he says. "Just go inside, hand the guy at the table your ticket, and try to enjoy yourself." Jim removes the ticket from his pocket and hands it to you.

You take it. "You'll be here when I'm done?" you ask.

Jim smiles, that smile you like that pulls his beard up his face. He gives a playful, reassuring nudge to your shoulder. "Of course, kid. Just enjoy yourself, have fun, and uh...don't let that Wheeler kid do anything you're not okay with. Or anything I wouldn't be okay with, for that matter."

You furrow your brow and wonder what he could possibly have meant by that, but figure you'd ask him another time. You simply nod in a way that you hope shows that you got the message, and say "I'm gonna go in now. I think...I wanna do this alone."

"It's all you, kid, good luck in there. I'll be out here if you need anything."

Jim gives you one last nudge to the shoulder, and walks off to somewhere else in the parking lot. You watch him go for a moment, before turning back to the door, and take a moment to collect yourself. One breath in, one breath out. The expelled breath drifts lazily upwards in front of your eyes, persisting for an instant before vanishing.

You reach out to touch the freezing metal of the door handle, and push. Instantly you're awash with the building's heater directly above your head, and your legs and arms get goosebumps from the sudden change in temperature-or the newest wave of nerves, you're not sure which.

To your right is a man sitting at a desk (or rather, a converted lunchroom table) just as Jim said there'd be. It is someone you recognize vaguely as Mr. Clark, Mike's teacher, whom you had "met" a year ago when Mike and his friends had snuck you into school. You had been wearing blonde hair and a pink dress with different makeup though, so you hope beyond hope that he won't recognize you and wonder why Mike's second cousin Eleanore from Sweden was here at the Snowball.

You walk up to him, and say "hi. I have a, uh, ticket for the dance."

You place the ticket on the table, and then slide it towards him out of urgency. He looks at you, looks down at the ticket, then back at you, and you find yourself wringing your hands together behind your back as you see the confused unfamiliarity painted on his face transform into the briefest hint of recognition. As if on cue, the music from inside the dancehall changes to something else, something faster paced with a heavier beat, and you know this well from all of those TV shows to mean something bad is about to happen. But in the end, Mr. Clark simply says "well it appears you do," and takes the ticket to

place in a tray where it joins the other discarded tickets, before adding "have fun at the dance, and have a very Merry Christmas."

You can't help but smile. You thank him, and turn at once to put as much distance between yourself and him as you can before he asks if he knows you from somewhere. You step through the final door, and are struck with awe at the sight before you.

Whatever you had imagined in your dreams, it wasn't this, but this is infinitely better in its reality. Brilliant silver and blue streams of glistening material hang from the gymnasium rafters, enclosing the dance floor in a rectangular arena where seemingly hundreds of kids dance, converse at punch bowls, eat food at round tables covered in white cloth, laugh, and live life. The banner "SnowBall 1984" hangs against the far wall, proudly welcoming you at long last.

The atmosphere is charged with energy, with couples holding each other close and sort of swaying back and forth, stepping in unison. It's a display you find to be surprisingly simple yet also strangely disconcerting. You have no idea how the couples step as such perfect mirrors to each other without falling over each other, but you decide to push that thought aside, for you see some familiar faces.

Max stands out in the crowd with her red hair, and you see with some satisfaction that she is dancing with Lucas. A perhaps less respectable part of your mind nods its solemn approval, if only for the simple fact that she isn't dancing with Mike. You make a mental note to say hi to her at some point in the night.

Dustin isn't as recognizable, because something strange has happened to his hair. It lays flat on the sides, but remains poofy across the top, and stretches down the back. You have the distinct impression of a large bird. Stranger still, he is dancing with Nancy, which makes absolutely no sense to you, especially after what Jim had told you about people only dancing with people they love. Are they together? Do they *love* each other?

These were questions that would hopefully come with answers soon enough, but you push this confusion back into whatever mental bin was also holding all of your anxieties, because you find Will with a girl you don't know at all. The look on his face suggests something

between jubilation and terror as this girl, who is almost a head taller than him, leads him along in their dance. You had never actually met Will, despite all that had happened (or rather, because of it), and hoped to fix that before the night was out.

Finally, however, as you continue to scan the room, you find Mike, who has already found you. He is standing alone, apart from all of the other students, the only one of your friends without a partner. And were it not for the swelling sensation you're experiencing in your chest, you might have found the notion of your favorite person in the world sitting alone at a table during a dance to be heartbreaking.

But it isn't heartbreaking, not now. Certainly whatever indescribable thing was happening inside your chest was anything *but* heartbreaking. Indeed you are positive that nothing could ever ruin this exact moment, which seems to linger just a little longer than it probably really does. Something about the way his face lights up when he looks at you, the way his eyes widen and his mouth hangs slightly agape in apparent disbelief that you're actually *here*, a disbelief matched only by your own, causes time to stand still for a moment.

You both finally walk towards each other, and stop when you're only a foot apart. You can tell from the way he shakes his head that he can hardly believe his eyes. "You look beautiful," he says, almost exasperatedly. This compliment humbles you, and in a moment of sudden, wonderful embarrassment, you can't help but look down and away, with what must be the doofiest looking grin to have ever appeared on your face.

Mike looks beautiful too, though what remains of your rational self tells you that's not exactly the proper word. The way his thick hair completely covers his forehead (hair which you have the sudden urge to run your hand through) almost down to his brown eyes, his tan suit jacket and grey sweater overlaying a red tie and blue dress shirt, even his dark dress pants...he looks perfect. Perfect, yes. That sounds like a better word.

For a brief moment your mind goes back to all of those soaps you watch on TV, and the triumphant moment where the two lovers come together. The music always swells as they embrace and express their

undying love for each other, and you feel all warm and fuzzy inside, sharing through empathy a shadow of the feelings of the characters on screen. Now, you feel what they feel, as they feel it, except this is better. Mike isn't some ultra confident macho man with slicked back hair and rippling muscles lifting you off the ground into a passionate kiss. He's Mike, with all of his awkward shifting, twisting of the leg, hands held stiffly at his side, and that teeth-filled grin which definitely reflects your own.

And that made him perfect. "Do you wanna dance?" he asks, with unnecessary urgency, as if he was peeling off a bandaid.

You look back to the other kids, all dancing and chatting merrily, in their own little isolated worlds that must have been similar to the one you and Mike were entering. You see the way their feet move, the way they hold each other, and admit with some hesitation "I...I don't know how."

Mike shrugs. "I don't either. Do you wanna figure it out?" Your anxieties are obliterated at once with the promise that whatever happened in the next few minutes, you'd both be in it together. You can't help but smile at that, and you nod with enthusiasm.

Mike takes your hand, leads you to the dance floor, and takes you through the steps that he knows to do. He places your hands on his shoulders "like this", places his hands at your waist, and you feel a rush of exhilaration, in part from his careful, gentle touch, and in part because he hasn't disappeared, as he always did when you reached out to him with your mind. He is physically here, and you are here with him, at the Snowball.

This is real, kid.

Mike's presence is enough to cement you in the present, and you share a smile that is reflected back at you as you dance. Awkwardly at first to be sure, both of you still trying to find the rhythm of the music and of each other. At first you're mostly letting him lead you, and you sense that he's just copying what everyone else is doing-to mixed results. You even step on his left foot at one point, but his laugh assures you that he doesn't mind at all. "I was afraid I was gonna do that first," he admits sheepishly. A few seconds later he

steps on your foot and mumbles something about "being even". Eventually, perhaps inevitably, you find your rhythm, and the two of you step and sway like all of the other couples on the dance floor.

This feeling...is one that was hard to categorize. It is a mixture of raw sensation-the feel of his hands at your waist, the odd but pleasant smelling cologne he is wearing, the steady beat of the music-and something not as physical. Something that comes from within your chest and into your mind, that shores up the fractures and fissures in the barrier between the past and the present, and which implores a simple but inexorable imperative that leads you to move as he moves, to step as he steps.

"Kid, that is one of life's great mysteries. And some folks never figure it out." As Mike leans in to kiss you, you lean in with him, and meet somewhere in the middle. It is a quick thing, an imperfect thing, nothing like in the movies with their long, drawn out passions. Rather a quick touch of the lips. It is another thing that you recognize will be something else that you'll have to figure out together-and you wholly welcome as many opportunities to practice as you can both manage. The quality is mundane to the message it carries.

The kiss sends sparks through you-and Mike, you're sure-and you feel a warm kind of chill spread throughout your body. You can't help but sense in that moment that you are one of those folks who have, in fact, figured it out, at least in some manner. Not kissing, but that most elusive of all emotions.

You smile, and nod your forehead so that it is resting on his, both of you basking in the simple, physical presence of each other. Apart for so long, and together again for at least one night, you are sure to live in and cherish every single moment.

With your foreheads pressed together and your hands at his shoulders, out of the corner of your eye, you catch a glimpse of the blue wristband. Its golden connective tether is glistening against the overhead lights. You smile a different kind of smile, born from some vague notion in the back of your mind that this wristband belongs to you, now, and that is something you feel eternally thankful for. You think of Sarah, not in the way you had all night, but in a new way you couldn't describe, even if you had the wherewithal to try.

You see a young blonde girl, with brilliant blue eyes, all smiles with a mouth full of disorganized teeth, running across a field with you watching some distance away, even if you can also somehow make out all of the details. You figure it to be some residual presence, perhaps of the past, left behind in the wristband itself. It is something only you could ever know and see, the same way you can reach out to people across infinite distance with photographs or items which are important to them.

"The time I spent with her? I value that. And I value you."

You see someone who is happy and hopeful, someone who is full of life and light, and you make a promise to no one but yourself that you'll try to be the best *you* that you can be, no matter what may have happened in the past.

As quickly as it came, this happy, pleasant image fades, as a kind of final goodbye. After only a brief moment you're back in the Snowball, the music bass beating in your chest, having just kissed Mike Wheeler. Now that imperfectly perfect boy is holding you close enough that you can feel his breaths, which come with deliberate slowness against your neck. A sleepy sort of state befalls you both. A total relaxation of the mind, the kind brought on through knowledge of absolute safety found only in another person. You slump into each others' shoulders, then, your hands falling slightly down his chest, his arms consciously rising higher to hold you at your back in a close, gentle embrace; his hands lock together just under your shoulder blades, and you feel his own shoulders relax.

You continue to sway lazily like this, in step with the music. Everyone else, including the guys, are too busy in their own little worlds to notice this *gross* display of tenderness, at least for now. But that is more than fine with you.

There will be time for more, time for you both to meet the other guys, and see the looks of sheer surprise on their faces. Mike hadn't told any of them he bought you a ticket, probably because he didn't know for sure whether you'd be able to even go. But you and Mike, with his friends, will have the best night of your lives so far. You will say hi to Max, you will finally meet Will-at which point he will thank you for saving his life on two occasions so far. You will laugh and

play, and drink punch and talk, and do everything that any normal girl of thirteen should do at the school dance. You might even cause a little trouble of your own involving your powers and that jerk Stacey's punch.

So not entirely normal, but then again, you never will be quite *normal*. Luckily for you and for the guys, "not quite normal" only meant you fit in like a glove.

There will be time for that. But for now, the barrier is sealed, the past is in the past, and the future will come in due time. For the first time in your life, you can live completely in the present, together with Mike and his embrace, which holds a kind of unspoken promise for a future brighter than anything in the past.

You are thankful for the moment alone you have with Mike, however long it lasts. You are thankful for Jim, and for all he has done. Most importantly you understand, at long last, that no matter what happened back then or may happen in the future, you deserve this moment, this happiness, this love.

Outside, Jim Hopper holds Joyce Byers under one arm, many things swimming in his mind. He considers the lie he told you, and weighs its complex value. He had promised to never lie, and in a way he technically hadn't-it *had* been Sarah's, the hairband, after all. She had even given it to him, but only for safe keeping until her hair had grown back. *"I'll keep it around my wrist, that way I'll never lose it. When you're ready, I'll give it back."*

It was a promise he'd never broken, because Jim Hopper was a man of his word, and if ever there was a time when he wasn't, it'd only be because he had made so many promises he'd lost track. Even as his arm is covered by his long sleeved jacket, his wrist had never felt more naked in the cold December air without that hairband. Some part of him still reels from the decision he made, but considering what Doctor Owens had handed him at the bar a few days ago, it was only in service to something true and special.

Jim wonders if it was a selfish thing, to have you wear Sarah's hairband and not tell you the whole story about what it really is. Realistically, he had no way of knowing what your reaction would be

when you found out, and even if he could guess, he'd have no way of knowing whether he was being objective or projecting his own hopes onto your imagined response. Because he certainly hoped that you'd accept him. He had already accepted you, and his giving you Sarah's hairband was his own way of showing that, if not for you just yet, then for himself.

Jim drops the half burned cigarette to the ground, stomping it out with his foot. Joyce shifts a little in his arm, and his mind is drawn back to what you had asked. No he had not, in fact, danced with Joyce Byers at the High School prom many moons ago, but he had in fact liked her. A lot actually. Enough to want to dance with her. But that had been so long ago, and so much had happened since, that Jim wonders if he was willing to try that again, to take that leap. Yet at the same time, the part of his mind that had compelled him to give you Sarah's hairband reminds him that he already has, in some way. What's one more leap after that?

The music changes again in the school, this time to a slow sort of tune, and Jim wonders if you're having a good time. You better be, or that Wheeler kid would see the inside of a cell by Monday, due process be damned. Jim was a great cop, but he was always a father first.

Because that's what he is, after all, even if you don't know it, even if your understanding of that word has been tarnished by someone who has no right to call himself the parent of anyone. Jim is a father, by his nature, and it was only very recently that he could be that again for someone.

Jim places his free hand inside his pocket and absently fingers the envelope that he's been carrying around for several days. He had been intending to show it to you as soon as he got it, but the prospect of you going to the Snowball put that plan on a temporary hiatus. You didn't need to walk into the dance with that massive weight hanging off your head. Even if in his mind he imagined you jumping for joy, he knew acting on it now would be truly selfish.

You're a smart girl, he reasons, and figures that you'd be able to piece together the puzzle of the hairband on your own, certainly after he shows you the envelope. But like so many other things, that is a

promise for the future. For now, Jim is perfectly content allowing you to have a night where you could frolic and be free from any kind of life changing event. And he is perfectly happy with being able to wait on you in the bitter cold, if only so that he can share some more time with Joyce.

The envelope can wait until tomorrow.